

Joint Secretaries' Statement

Thank you to everyone who shared their stories with us at the West Metro Aboriginal Community Forum (the Forum) on 23 June 2022. We recognise the importance of your contributions and acknowledge the leadership, strength, and resilience of the Community and their Elders who were present on the day.

We listened deeply, and heard the challenges experienced by families in the West, and that this was too often connected to a lack of resources and culturally safe supports and services. We acknowledge that these experiences are manifestations of the ongoing impact of colonisation and recognise that our response also needs to rectify past wrongs.

More can and must be done to support the West Community.

You told us about a range of individual issues which we have been responding to since the Forum. We know that immediate changes have already been made – including back-payments to carers. We want to make sure this continues. There is a contact list on the back of this statement that identifies who to contact directly if your issue is still outstanding.

Beyond the impact of your experiences, we also heard your strength and commitment to your Community. We heard a Community that can and wants to lead on solutions. We heard that government needs to invest more in Community-driven solutions and ways of working. We commit to ensuring that the actions of this Statement will continue to be shaped by the voices of Aboriginal people in support of Victoria's Treaty and truth-telling processes. That is why some of our language in the actions set out below is still very broad: we want to ensure that your voices, through an ongoing conversation, shape how these actions come to life.

To make this happen, we will:

- 1) **Support the establishment of a dedicated Aboriginal Community space in the West.** This will include Community consultation to identify what is needed and report back to Community within 6 months.
- 2) **Listen to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) about what they need to build their capacity,** including:
 - service planning
 - coordinated and/or flexible funding approaches
 - support for grant and other funding applications, and
 - establishing a Community of Practice to support practitioners to improve networking, service navigation and manage their cultural load.

A report back to the community on findings from this consultation is to occur within 6 months, with a particular focus on how to improve the availability and accessibility of culturally appropriate health and wellbeing services.

- 3) **Implement new models of care for families in the West**, starting with the Putting Families First model in Brimbank-Melton, supporting the whole family to create lasting change across justice, health (including mental health and wellbeing supports) and social service needs, informed by culturally safe practice.
- 4) **Provide information on how funds allocated to mainstream services are being used**, including the ways in which they provide culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal people. This is to be provided within 6 months through Community leaders and key agencies.
- 5) **Improve community access to information on culturally specific services** available in their area by firstly circulating factsheets to the community with relevant contact details within 3 months and then by reviewing and, where appropriate, replacing current sources of information (e.g. websites) with community-controlled platforms within 12 months. This work is closely tied in with progress on escalation processes under action 12.
- 6) **Establish a West helpline** to assist carers to escalate and resolve individual service issues for children in out of home care, and for carers, to ensure they are receiving the right supports in a timely way.
- 7) **Review supports available to carers** (including Elders) and improve timeliness of carer contributions within 6 months, including consultation with carers, which will be reflected within the refresh of the *Victorian Carers Strategy 2021-2022*.
- 8) **Advocate for improved court listing practices** within 6 months by:
 - requesting that the Magistrates' Court of Victoria and Children's Court of Victoria consult regularly with Community on actions to minimise court delays, and
 - consulting with Community to identify ways to improve access to specialist and therapeutic court programs in the West.
- 9) **Place Community at the centre of delivery of legal services**, reporting back within 6 months on key work to deliver culturally safe and appropriate legal services in the West Metro. This will include reference to the development of the Aboriginal-led Aboriginal Legal Assistance Strategy, further work to identify legal needs in West Metro, and service mapping, including prospective services and programs under development, to ensure people can get the advocacy they need.
- 10) **Improve culturally safe and therapeutic approaches within Victoria's prison systems.** Government will ensure actions pertaining to kinship notification, transition housing and family engagement are outlined to the Community within 6 months. Further, this action will be progressed by considering the Aboriginal community voices that have engaged with the *Cultural Review of the Adult Custodial Corrections System* and any recommendations

relating to cultural safety and the delivery of culturally appropriate services to people in prison.

11) **Support delivery of culturally safe and inclusive policies and practices in Victorian schools**

Under its Marrung governance structure and in partnership with VAEAI, DET will work with the community to ensure schools are culturally safe environments in which the diverse and unique identities and experiences of Aboriginal children and young people are respected and valued. We will also ensure that processes for complaints and concerns are clear, and that students and families are supported to provide feedback to ensure the wellbeing of their children. This will complement broader work to implement the new child safe standards against which all Victorian schools (government and non-government) will be reviewed for compliance. We will report back to the community within 6 months via the West Metro RAJAC or an alternative avenue identified by the community.

12) **Support a self-organisation process for Community** in the West within 3 months by initiating the design of an ongoing Community-led engagement and governance mechanism which ensures:

- ongoing Community input to government's responses to individual and system-wide issues, and
- as part of this, building a clear and reliable complaints and escalation process, beginning with clarity on who the Community should contact to raise an issue.

This could include funding a culturally appropriate Community engagement and project lead to facilitate yarning circles, with the support and leadership of local Elders in each of the three West Metro areas.

As many of you said on the day, this is only the beginning of a lot more work and conversations, so we will continue to share and listen to Community as this work progresses.

To ensure we deliver on not just the above committed actions but also the longer-term responses that are needed, we will establish an **action plan** in partnership with the West Metro Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee (RAJAC), the West Metro Strategic Executive (WISE), and DFFH's West Division Aboriginal Governance Committee.

These three governance groups in the West will also facilitate opportunities for you to share your response to this statement. They will also facilitate report backs and listening to the Community on the progress of these actions ahead of the establishment of the Community-led engagement and governance approach.

Thank you again.



Rebecca Falkingham
DJCS Secretary



Brigid Sunderland
DFFH Secretary



Euan Wallace
DH Secretary



Jenny Atta
DET Secretary

Departmental contacts

Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS)

- Larissa Strong, *Commissioner, Corrections and Justice Services.*
Larissa.Strong@justice.vic.gov.au
- Jodi Henderson, *Commissioner, Youth Justice.*
Jodi.Henderson@justice.vic.gov.au

Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH)

- Paul Smith, *Deputy Secretary, West Division.*
Paul.A.Smith@dffh.vic.gov.au
- Tim Kanoa, *Acting Deputy Secretary, Aboriginal Self-Determination and Outcomes.*
Tim.Kanoa@dffh.vic.gov.au

Department of Health (DH)

- Nicole McCartney, *Chief Aboriginal Health Adviser.*
Nicole.McCartney@health.vic.gov.au

Department of Education and Training (DET)

- Kylie White, *Deputy Secretary Policy, Strategy and Performance.*
Kylie.White3@education.vic.gov.au